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SUBJECT: BULGARIA KICKS OFF DECADE OF ROMA INCLUSION WITH
CONTROVERSY OVER PLANS TO DISPLACE THEM

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In an official ceremony on July 4, Bulgaria took over the presidency of the 2005-2015 Decade of Roma Inclusion. The pomp and circumstance of Bulgaria's ascendancy to the Decade's presidency contrasts sharply, however, with the squalid living conditions of the Roma throughout the country, including Sofia, where municipal authorities are threatening anew to raze their squatter settlements. Despite plans to improve Roma living conditions, reduce discrimination against Roma and improve their standard of living, the GOB can point to very little tangible progress in the last year. With the government distracted by EU accession goals and NGOs facing funding cuts, we can expect little progress in 2006 on this perennial human rights problem. END SUMMARY

POMP AND CIRCUMSTANCE, BUT NO REAL PROGRESS

¶2. (U) In an official ceremony on July 4, Bulgaria took the reins from Romania of the presidency of the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015. Eight Central and Eastern European countries launched the initiative in April 2005, with the financial support of the World Bank and Open Society Institute, to speed Roma integration by overcoming discrimination and poverty. The Initiative targets four priorities: integration in education, equal access to health care services, accessible housing, and job creation. Attended by several high-ranking members of government, including President Parvanov and PM Stanishev, the event offered the GOB an opportunity to highlight efforts it has undertaken in the past year to better integrate the Roma population. Instead, Stanishev observed that integrating the Roma -- and generally improving their social status and standard of living -- was a challenge throughout the region and required a joint effort. Pledging Bulgaria's commitment to guaranteeing the equality of all citizens, the PM stated that this goal was a focus for all cabinet policies. "For years, Bulgaria did not have a comprehensive state policy of Roma inclusion," he acknowledged, adding that the government is now aware of the need to coordinate and fund such a policy.

¶3. (SBU) Left unmentioned in Stanishev's speech was the ten-year action plan -- developed by the GOB after the Decade's launch and approved by the Council of Ministers in April 2005 -- which included pledges to build and renovate tens of thousands of homes and allocate 1M leva (USD 657,000) for education and social inclusion projects to benefit the Roma. Little real progress has been made on these goals. A statement released by the Council of Ministers after the PM's speech cited the GOB's development of a health strategy for the underprivileged, establishment of a Center for Educational Integration, and approval of a national program for improving minority conditions. The National Coordinator for the initiative, Deputy Labor and Social Policy Minister

Yavor Dimitrov (one of two Roma deputy ministers), has announced the creation of a Roma Inclusion Council, although its specific role has not been fleshed out.

¶4. (SBU) Although the GOB has built 11 new apartment blocks in Sofia and Plovdiv with the financial support of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, NGOs report that many of the new units have been put to commercial use. After living in the apartments for approximately a week, a number of Roma families moved out -- presumably back to the ghettos -- and rented their units to private companies. In fact, when asked whether the Roma themselves are pushing for integration, the head of a local Roma NGO acknowledged that they "want to keep the ghettos, as long as living conditions improve." A recent outbreak of hepatitis in a Roma ghetto in Plovdiv, which has sickened more than 100 people, bears witness to the squalid living conditions, often exacerbated by infrequent or nonexistent garbage pick-up and sewage services.

MAKING MATTERS WORSE

¶5. (SBU) Adding insult to injury, the PM's expressions of commitment to Roma issues came the same week as Sofia municipal authorities planned the demolition of illegal Roma settlements in one of the city's Roma ghettos. Although not all Roma residences are fully illegal squatter camps -- some Roma houses were built without construction permits on land they have the titles to -- Sofia has issued repeated threats to raze a number of homes. The threatened demolitions are not without precedent: 150 Roma were left homeless by the August 2005 demolition of 22 Roma houses lacking legal deeds in the Hristo Botev district of Sofia. A series of appeals

from the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee resulted in a recent ruling by the Supreme Administrative Court that the forceful eviction of illegally settled Roma is legal, which paves the way for future demolitions.

¶6. (U) The current target of Sofia officials is the 30-year-old Vazrazhdane ghetto, home to more than 200 people who live with minimal infrastructure or access to basic services. Although some of its residents have houses in their native towns and villages, many would have nowhere to go if they were displaced from their Sofia homes, where some of them have lived for decades. Despite promises by the Ministry of Social Affairs that single mothers will be placed in temporary shelters and families with children will receive one-time social benefits, monetary compensation will be no more than 275 leva (USD 183), and some families would receive none at all.

¶7. (U) Sofia's plans have prompted outrage at both the international and local levels. Four members of the European Parliament wrote PM Stanishev to oppose the planned demolitions and urge a permanent solution to the problem. Only then did Sofia Mayor Borisov halt the demolitions scheduled for July 7. The MEPs' letter sent city officials scurrying to find a temporary housing solution for the Roma who would be displaced. Plans have been announced to house displaced Roma in preselected areas of town in prefabricated homes or even caravans, to be funded by the Ministry of Regional and Public Works. The decision to shelter the Roma in temporary houses has roused the indignation of city residents, who gathered on July 10 to protest the planned resettlement of Roma in their neighborhoods. In a measure of the unmitigated prejudice against Roma, similar demonstrations have been held around the country to protest plans to send displaced Roma back to the towns and villages of their official residence.

SOFIA AUTHORITIES: CHASTENED AND FRUSTRATED

¶8. (SBU) In a July 27 meeting with poloffs, Sofia Deputy

Mayor Tsvetan Tsvetanov acknowledged EU pressure to deal with the situation humanely, but emphasized that the national government should be the one developing policy on this issue.

Tsvetanov said that the increased migration of Roma to Sofia over the past few years had exacerbated underlying ethnic tensions by straining resources and creating substandard living conditions. "What kind of city has horse-drawn carts?" he asked, with clear frustration. Municipal authorities expect to have a clearer idea of how they will deal with the Roma "situation" by mid to late August. The City Architect has identified a new location - the site of former outdoor market -- to relocate Roma displaced by demolitions, although Tsvetanov asked us to keep the location confidential to prevent further neighborhood protests. When

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asked whether resettled Roma would be provided with municipal services like electricity and waste disposal, he responded that they would receive service that would meet their standards, including electricity and running water. The city has included the Roma Public Council in its discussions. However, the Deputy Mayor made clear his distrust of such NGOs, calling for stricter monitoring of the funds they receive from the EU.

NGOS FACE GRITTY REALITY WITH EMPTY POCKETS

¶9. (U) The strongest voice for Roma rights belongs to the NGO community, which has been muffled in recent years by a downward trend in donor funding for Roma programs. Several organizations asserted that governments have turned off the tap for bilateral assistance to Bulgaria in the expectation that EU structural funds will soon begin flowing down the pipeline. Programs focusing on Roma tend to be limited in scope, and they are confronted with the challenge of achieving sustainable results within the typical one-year implementation period for grant-funded projects. The projects with greatest potential are those backed by the government and multiple donor agencies. An example is the business center for Roma that recently opened in the coastal city of Burgas to foster job creation by supporting small businesses and agricultural producers. The center has been financed by the Swedish International Development Agency and constructed on land provided rent-free by the city, and is being implemented, with the support of the UNDP, by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) In recent years, Bulgaria's Roma policy has vacillated between extremes: the GOB has either ignored the problem of social and economic inequality altogether, or responded reflexively to its side effects with overly aggressive measures such as the demolitions. A commitment to addressing the problem -- honestly, humanely, and over the long-term -- is sorely needed. To develop and implement a comprehensive plan of action, the Government must involve all relevant ministries in the dialogue, putting an emphasis on identifying solutions that are sustainable. The Roma themselves are often accused of being the biggest impediments to social reforms. The GOB must therefore find a way to sell its reforms to ethnic Bulgarians, who will be suspicious of any programs they perceive as discriminating in favor of an ethnic minority. The GOB has been sidetracked by its EU accession goal, which has its own set of seemingly intractable problems. Real progress on this issue will likely have to wait until after EU accession, when Bulgaria will have more time and funding to address this ongoing human rights problem -- if the political will is there. END COMMENT

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